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Sub-Commission on the Promotion
and Protection of Human Rights
Fifty-fourth session
Item 5 of the provisional agenda

PREVENTION OF DISCRIMINATION

Written statement* submitted by Syriac Universal Alliance, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[5 July 2002]

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*This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

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A call for attention to the future well-being of the forgotten Aramean Christians

Dear members of the Sub-Commission,

Please allow me, the main representative to UNOG on behalf of the Syriac Universal Alliance (hereafter: SUA), to call your sincere attention briefly in this short letter.

I will start with an historical outline, to make you acquainted with the people who are represented by SUA. Subsequently, the present situation of these people will be showed to you. Further the SUA will be introduced to you. Finally, I would like to present to the members of the Sub-Commission the cloudy future prospects of this ancient people, but yet so frequently forgotten and neglected and ask you for the necessary help and support.

History & Identity

The Arameans were an important ethnic group in the Near East during the late second and the first millennium B.C. Their earliest history is mainly known to us via three sources: the Bible, the Assyrian annals and the Aramaic inscriptions. According to Biblical testimony, the Jewish patriarchs were Arameans too.[1] Biblical and non-biblical sources further attest to the many Aramean kingdoms[2] that existed mainly in the northern area of current Syria, southeastern Turkey and northern Iraq. This whole region was known as "Aram-Naharaim" in Hebrew. The Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible (Septuagint, 280 BC), translated the words "Aram-Naharaim", "Aram(eans)" and " Aramaic" with " Mesopotamia", "Syria(ns)" and "Syrian".

Under the Persians (ca. 539-331 B.C.) Aramaic officially became the *lingua franca*. When the Christian message was proclaimed in the Fertile Crescent, Aramaic was still a dominant language in the region beside Greek. When the Arameans heard the Gospel in their mother tongue, they converted to Christianity and established together with the apostles of Jesus Christ and the converted Jews, the Syrian Church of Antioch. Due to external factors, the Aramean Christians underwent a change of name and finally adopted the name which the Greek world already used to call them and their language namely: Syrians and Syriac. To avoid association with Arab Syrians from Syria, the Syriac-Orthodox prefer "Syriacs" above "Syrians" as self-designation in English.

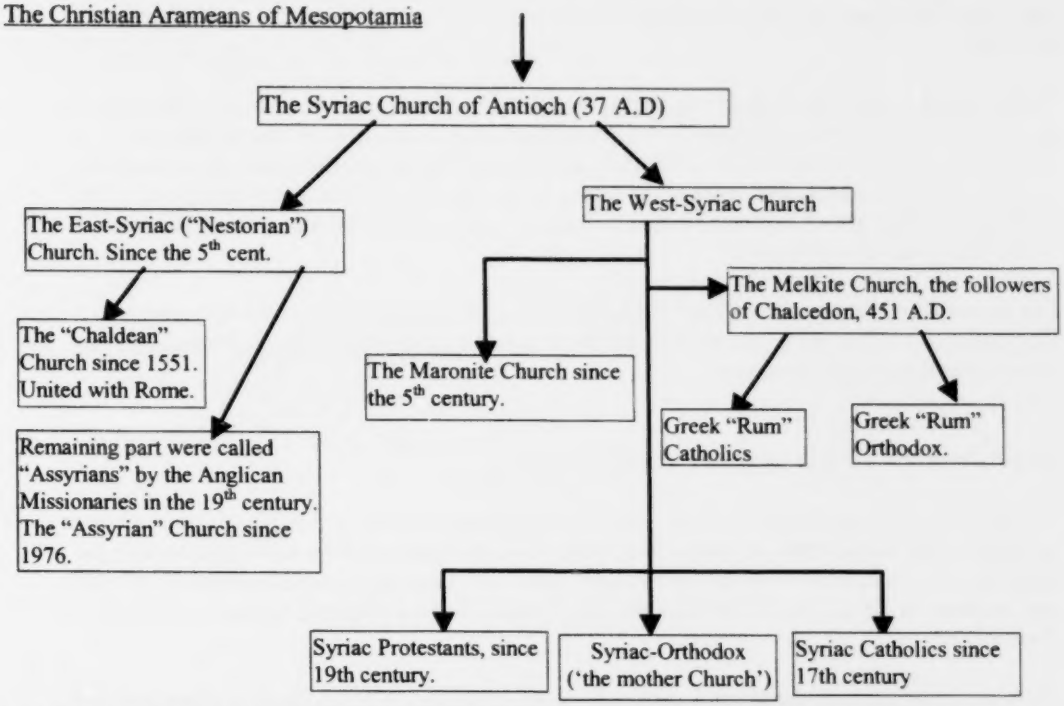
Due to geographical reasons, the Arameans were termed "*West-Syriacs*", those who were living in the Roman (later Byzantine) empire, and "*East-Syriacs*" those who were living in the Parthian (since 226 AD Sasanian; Persian) empire.
The liturgical language of both these communities is called *Syriac*, i.e. an Aramaic dialect from Edessa (Urfa, Turkey) that was rapidly accepted as the literary language of all non-Greek eastern Christendom. Syriac (Aramaic) was the primary vehicle for the Christianization of large parts of central and south-central Asia in early Christianity. It is also the literary language of the Maronites of Lebanon; the Melkites of Syria (replaced Syriac with Arabic in the 17th century). Syriac (Aramaic) played also an important role as the intermediary through which Greek learning and thought passed to the Islamic world and eventually to Europe.

Due to the missionary activities of the Roman Catholic Church in the 16th century, a schism divided *The (Syriac) Church of the East*[3]. Those who kept faithful to their (mother) church, stayed "Nestorians". Those who embraced the Roman Catholic dogma, however, were called "*Chaldeans*" in order to distinguish them from their "Nestorian" brothers. Similarly, the remaining part of the "Nestorians" were termed "Assyrians" in the 19th century; this time by Anglicans

missionaries. In the early 20th century "Assyrianism" was developed and spread among some Syriac communities. Some rejected this political idea with its mythological linkage to the ancient Assyrians; whereas others accepted it.

In order to provide a clear picture about the various denominations, below a scheme is presented.

The Christian Arameans of Mesopotamia


The Syriac Church of Antioch (37 A.D)
The East-Syriac ("Nestorian") Church. Since the 5th cent.
The West-Syriac Church
The "Chaldean" Church since 1551. United with Rome.
Remaining part were called "Assyrians" by the Anglican Missionaries in the 19th century. The "Assyrian" Church since 1976.
The Maronite Church since the 5th century.
The Melkite Church, the followers of Chalcedon, 451 A.D.
Greek "Rum" Catholics
Greek "Rum" Orthodox.
Syriac Protestants, since 19th century.
Syriac-Orthodox ('the mother Church')
Syriac Catholics since 17th century

In the light of the historical truth and in honour to the ancestors, SUA remains loyal to its two correct historical interchangeable names: *Arameans and Syriacs*. Regarding this synonymy for one and the same people, we quote a famous Greek and a Syriac historian, namely:
Posidonius (ca. 150 B.C.): *"The people we* [Greeks] *call Syrians were called by the Syrians themselves Arameans."*
St. Michael the Great († 1199 A.D.)[4]: *"The kingdoms which have been established in Antiquity by our race, (that of) the Arameans, namely the descendants of Aram, who were called Syrians."*

Present-day situation of the Aramean (Syriac) people

The Golden Age of the Syriac (Aramean) Christians was between the fourth and eighth centuries. Dark Ages followed soon, however. With the Arabic conquests not only Arabic supplanted Aramaic, but the Arameans (Syriacs) also lost many people to the Arabic Islam. As former teachers of the Arabs, they later became to be treated as second-class citizens by them. They faced many persecutions (even under the Byzantines!) and forced conversions to Islam. With the infiltration of Kurdish tribes in the region since the 11th century, the Syriac (Aramean) people suffered torture, discrimination, killing and been the victims of robbery. From the 15th century onward, with the establishment of the Ottoman Empire, there was no improvement.

One of the many dark pages in their history is under Timur Lane in the 14th century, who decimated the Syriac (Aramean) Christians. Similarly, hundreds of thousands innocent Syriacs

(Arameans) who lived in the Ottoman Empire and Persia in the 19th and early 20th century, became once again victims of genocide and mass-scale ethnic cleansing.

In the late 19th and early 20th century, many Aramean Christians fled from their ancient homelands to the West. A second immigration wave started from the 1960s in *Tur-'Abdin*, in Southeast Turkey. Even in the mid 1990s many fled from this former Christian region because they feared their lives. These mass-exoduses brought thousands of Arameans (Syriacs) and their language to the West.

Unfortunately, exact figures about the Syriac (Aramean) population are not available. We estimate, however, the total number of all the Syriac (Aramean) denominations to be approximately 4 million globally. As to the Syriac – Orthodox, the vast majority of them live in Diaspora and are counted to be around 650.000 worldwide! Also a large majority of the other Syriac branches live in Diaspora. They are all in serious danger to become victims of assimilation (like Arabization, Turkification and Kurdification).

The peaceful and democratic minded Arameans (Syriacs) are a homeless people with a sacred language and a rich heritage, which was, till the present day, buried beneath the persecutions and ethnic cleansing of past centuries.

Syriac Universal Alliance (http://www.syriac-ua.org)

Living in the four corners of the world, the Syriacs (Arameans) have managed to institute several cultural unions as guardians of their rich heritage. Soon these associations were united under the umbrella of a Federation. Aramaic Federations under the patronage of SUA (established in 1983) can be found in the U.S.A., Australia, Lebanon, Sweden, France, Belgium, Germany, Holland and Switzerland.

SUA is a constitutional, democratic, civil and secular organization and political independent, built on the bases of respect for every people, ethnicity and religion.

Our main objectives are:

- To become an independent organization in the form of a governmental structure serving the Aramean (Syriac) people worldwide;
- To guard the Arameans from falling apart, being dispersed and assimilated in the Diaspora as well as in Aram-Naharaim (=Mesopotamia), their original home;
- To represent the Arameans (Syriacs) globally and to protect their human rights;
- To preserve the ancient cultural heritage of the Syriacs (Arameans) in the present and future.

An example of projects to meet our objectives is *"The Hidden Pearl"*.[5] This multimedia masterpiece consists out of three videotapes and three books and covers 3000 years of Aramaic history.

Appeal to the Sub-Commission

The SUA is aware, and the thought frightens us, that a nation which forgets its language forgets its past and soon loses its identity. Our first appeal is therefore to support the SUA by all means possible in protecting an ancient people, with a rich heritage, which have suffered genocides, torture, ethnic cleansing and been the victims of robbery carried out by the various peoples and

regimes of the Middle-East during centuries.

In all modesty, SUA requests the Sub-Commission for attention and support in:

- putting the forgotten and neglected Aramean (Syriac) question on the agenda;
- making the world familiar with the existence of the forgotten Syriac (Aramean) people;
- revising the Treaty of Lausanne (1923) wherein the Arameans are not recognized as an ethnic minority by Turkey.
- establishing an international enquiry commission on the 1915 mass killings consisting out of independent academics from different countries;
- authorizing the Arameans in their homelands (Aram-Naharaim):
  to protect, use and promote their respective language and religion
  to renovate and build new churches and monasteries
  to restore architectural monuments and various places of worship
  to open schools, social institutions and cultural associations
  to restore the names of villages, towns and places in their original (Aramaic) language.

I highly thank you for your precious time and attention. For any further questions or contacts, I can be reached at the addresses referred to below.

Respectfully Yours,

Gabriel Sengo
Syriac Universal Alliance
Main Representative to UNOG
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[1] E.g., Genesis 25:20; 28:5ff.; Deuteronomy 26:5.
[2] E.g., Aram-Beth-Rehob, Aram-Damascus, Aram-Mosh/Tur-'Abdin.
[3] Since 1976: *The Assyrian Church of the East*.
[4] For more quotes by the Syriac historians, see www.aramnaharaim.org.
[5] Cf. http://sor.cua.edu/Pub/BrockHPearl/index.html and http://www.aramnaharaim.org/film_arameans.htm.